


Book Review

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Problems of Living: Perspectives from Philosophy, Psychiatry, and Cognitive-Affective Science

By D. Stein. (Pp. 308; \$150.00; ISBN 978-0-323-90239-7.) London, UK: Academic Press, 2021

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Think back to a point earlier in your life where you became aware of a vast intellectual landscape of ideas, thinkers, and artisans that reached back many years. Your exposure initiated an enthusiasm to know more, and later, to maybe join those explorers who are uncovering the territory's past and extending it in new directions. Perhaps you aspired to ask and answer the big questions as they appeared across philosophy and history and art and science. Somewhere along the path, most of you put the big questions aside, and your aspirations were overshadowed by the demands of specialization. If they survived at all, those aspirations persisted as a lingering intellectual curiosity, but not something that you poured your resources into.

What, however, if you had taken a less linear path forward, pursuing specialization with due diligence and considerable success, without losing your enthusiasm for the big questions or forgoing the study of philosophy in particular. If you were precocious to begin with and kept to the program, in time you might have established a perch in our intellectual landscape similar to that occupied by Dan Stein.

In psychiatry, the phrase problems-in-living is associated with Thomas Szasz-inspired critiques of the concept of mental disorder. Such critiques argue that rather than being medical disorders, much of what is classified as psychiatric distress and dysfunction are normal problems-in-living. Stein's title does not refer to such critiques. Rather, he is exploring *the big questions and hard problems OF living*. For him these include:

What is the best way of thinking about mind and brain?
How should we balance reason and emotion?
What is happiness and how can we bring it about?
How should we think about pain and suffering?
How should we conceptualize good and evil?
How do we know what is really true?
What is the meaning of life?

Stein argues that recent advances in psychiatry, psychology, and neuroscience offer new resources for providing better answers to the big questions and hard problems of living.

To explore traditional philosophical topics, Stein identifies a classical position, a critical position, and an integrative position. Stein lumps a large mix of views into each of these categories. The classical position encompasses ancient and medieval essentialist views combined with positivist (objectivist) perspectives in modern philosophy. The critical position encompasses constructionism, subjectivism, and variation across time and culture. Stein's integrative position incorporates what he considers the best ideas from the classical positions and the critical positions. His integrative attitude is scientific (emphasizing facts), pragmatic (taking human purposes and values into account), and pluralistic.

He also adopts a secondary organizational model for many chapters. First, he surveys contrasting ideas from philosophy, psychiatry, and neuroscience (under which he includes cognitive and evolutionary psychology). Second, he decomposes each chapter's topic into key issues. Third, he articulates an integrative answer to the big question for that chapter. Stein's answers to the big questions are balanced and reasonable, academically informed, and articulated with appropriate humility rather than with conviction. Each chapter is a worthy read.

Written in accessible language, the book's purpose is not to advance the philosophical or psychiatric literature *per se*, but to use that literature to examine timeless questions. Indeed, the standout chapters are those that are less technically philosophical (chapters on happiness, suffering, and the meaning of life) where Stein brings a down-to-earth academic's sensibility to topics often addressed in the self-help literature. Among the philosophical ideas he continually returns to are Lakoff and Johnson's work on metaphor, the embodied and embedded mind, non-essentialism about natural kinds, and Aristotle's quest for middle grounds between extremes.

Despite the fact that the book is written for a broad academic audience, it should also hold some unique appeal to psychiatrists and psychologists. Stein's various answers to the big questions and hard problems jointly articulate a single meta-integrative framework. According to this framework, there is a world that is mind-independent and claims about it are true or false no matter what we want to believe, but our knowledge of it is also molded by concepts, metaphors, and evaluative norms. Having this kind of conceptual framework is useful for negotiating between viewing truth as made by the world or constructed by us and also for not over-simplifying the contrasts between mind *v.* brain, science *v.* art, and good *v.* bad in the study of psychopathology.

In books that seek to be 'accessible,' authors typically avoid -isms and are loath to recite a litany of names. Although reasonably accessible, this is not that kind of a book. Stein has packed it

with tables that summarize various positions on the issues and he does not shy away from naming key thinkers. Having an enthusiasm for an intellectual landscape often includes wanting to develop a taxonomy of the viewpoints and thinkers who inhabit it. In comparison to books written by public intellectuals that assiduously avoid all -isms, I appreciated Stein's alternative choice. In fact, Stein is so enthusiastic about these ideas that he included a more comprehensive (and impressive) taxonomy of names in footnotes that sometimes take up half a page.

For those inspired to think more deeply about the big questions and hard problems of living, both the text and footnotes offer options for further reading. Stein's own answers to the big questions can also serve as well-placed base camps from which to find your own scenic path through this great and vast landscape.